THE LAUGHTER OF THE ANGELS

CHAUTAUQUA INSTITUTION

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 104:1-9

Mark 10:35-45

Job 38:1-7; 42:1-6

"Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind." Job 38:1 (NRSV)

"The more I reflect on the amazing conclusions of astrophysics and, like human beings from time immemorial, look up into the clear night sky, am I not to wonder what it all means, where it all comes from? To answer, "Out of nothing," is no explanation. Reason

cannot be satisfied with that. The only serious alternative . . . . is that the whole stems from that first creative cause of causes, which we call God and indeed the Creator God" (Hans Küng, Does God Exist?).

One of the delightful things about grandchildren, and there are many delightful things, is that they are an almost endless source of sermon illustrations. A prominent theologian once said that children are good theologians: they think ontologically — about the very essence of things and raise the most profound questions. "Who made God?" I recall is a perennial favorite. Four year old Eleanor was a good theologian when she decided to talk to her Daddy about death and what

happens to people when they die. Her father responded that we go to heaven to be with God. He went on to say that he would already be there when she arrived and he'd be so happy to see her. "No, no, Daddy," Eleanor said, "I don't want to see you when I get to heaven, I want to see God!"

Eleanor was exactly right. God is the subject, the reason we are here this morning, the reason we got out of bed and did something counterculture, something we didn't have to do — gathered here to sing and pray and listen and then, perhaps most counterculture-of-all, got out our checkbooks and wallet and gave away money so that the enterprise can continue. God is the reason. "What

shall I preach about?" the young seminary graduate asked his professor as he faced the daunting task of preaching his first sermon. "Preach about God" the professor responded, "and preach about 20 minutes." That's my plan this morning.

It is the basic human question: God or no God. Is there a "More" William James asked, something "more" than this world, this life, or is this all there is? We build our worldview on the answer to that question. We practice our religion and we structure our lives on it. It is, Marcus Borg says, the central question in modern Western culture. Do we live in the presence of an eternal God — or is secular humanism the only rational option? Is there a

“More,” or is this physical world that we touch, see, feel — all there is?

Most of us were brought up with the idea of God “up there,” in heaven, sitting on a mighty throne. Sometimes the picture was clear: a kindly, grandfatherly old man with a long white beard, or perhaps an angry judge. God “up there.” It’s an old idea based on ancient cosmology. In the space age we had to rethink the whole notion: “up” wasn’t really “up” anymore, so we started to think about God “out there,” at some place in the universe. God created everything, returned to his throne to observe human history, occasionally intervening to change the course of events: to rescue, to punish, reward or help people: with matters

grand and trivial: to heal, to save, to help win the war or with the sale of the house or the acquisition of a parking place. My friend, Barbara Wheeler, President of Auburn Seminary, keeps an icon on her dashboard — "The Parking Place Goddess" she calls it. She lives in New York City where you need all the help you can get.

Marcus Borg, who teaches religion at Oregon State University, says that sooner or later that concept of God, which he calls "Supernatural Theism," stops working for us and many simply drop the subject, stop believing altogether. Every school term one of his students says after class: "This is all very interesting but I have a problem every time you use the word 'God,'

because, you see," — here there is usually a pause and a deep breath — "I really don't believe in God." Borg states, "I always respond in the same way: 'Tell me about the God you don't believe in.' Invariably it is the God of supernatural theism. I then tell them that I don't believe in that God either. They are surprised. They don't know that there is an alternative to supernatural theism" (The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith, p. 68).

For most people what first challenges this older idea of God on a throne, up in heaven, occasionally intervening, is the reality of suffering and tragedy. We bump along with our cozy grandfatherly God on his throne,

and then someone we love gets terribly, painfully sick, or three wonderful teenagers perish in an automobile wreck, or a man walks into an elementary school and kills five little girls and we ask "Why?" It is an inevitable and profound question that we all ask. If God is sitting up there on a throne watching and can intervene, then why in the world doesn't God do it, intervene, stop the Holocaust, the wars, the senseless tragedy, the 9/11s? Why doesn't God simply abolish cancer and birth defects? You can get out of the dilemma by concluding that God either causes the tragedies, or at least allows them for reasons that are God's alone. But there is something basically wrong with that. It doesn't work . . . . God causing human suffering — allowing the

suffering. So maybe what is wrong is the God concept. Maybe we need to start all over again.

A good place to start is with an ancient story — the story of Job who, in fact, asked the very same questions we are still asking about God.

Job was a good man, lived a good life, enjoyed success as a businessman, husband, and father. In the story Job doesn't know that there is a conversation going on in heaven between God and Satan. The topic is faith — the fascinating human tendency to believe — in God. "Look at Job" God says, "a good and faithful man." "Take away all he has" Satan responds, "and

you'll see how little he actually believes."

The Book of Job is one of the great accomplishments in the history of literature. Job's life falls apart. He loses it all: cattle, children, loses his own appearance, dignity and reputation and even the support of his wife who tells him to curse God and die.

Friends tell him his suffering is a result of his own sin. Job knows better. He has done nothing to deserve this. And so Job does the unexpected: even in his suffering he holds more tightly to God: petitions God to speak to him, to explain, to help him understand why all this has happened.

Finally God answers — out of the whirlwind. And what God says, beautifully and poetically, is that "I am God and you are not." "Where were you when I shut in the sea and made the clouds and commanded the morning?" God asks. On and on it goes and it leaves Job speechless. "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me" . . . . And then one of the most provocative statements of all: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you."

What did Job see? Apparently, a God far larger, more vast, than anything he had imagined. A God indescribable, who will not submit to human interrogation. A God, in the words of the old hymn, "immortal, invisible —in

light inaccessible, hid from our eyes." But — a God who is real and present with Job, a God with whom Job can converse, a God who comes close enough to be with Job in all he experiences.

And so the answer is not that God causes, or allows, suffering. But that suffering happens in the freedom of the life God has given. And God shares it, understands it, enters into it with us, weeps with us when we weep, holds us when we fall, and keeps us finally and ultimately safe and secure. When his son Alex died in a traffic accident and a friend tried to comfort him by saying, "it was God's will," William Sloane Coffin strenuously objected: "God didn't will

Alex's death. In fact, God's heart was the first to break."

What kind of God you believe in makes all the difference in the world. Just as there is a choice between believing or not believing in God, so we choose what kind of God to believe in: a remote, impersonal God who orchestrates everything that happens, a kind of heavenly puppeteer, busily pulling the strings, or a personal God, who is present in life with us, a God in St. Paul's terms, "in whom we live and move and have our being."

Furthermore, what you believe God is like shapes your faith, your practice of religion and the way you live your life. Is God primarily concerned with

personal virtue, a lawgiver and judge with a long list of requirements, who will determine whether we are rewarded or punished? Or is God compassionate and just, concerned to transform individuals into compassionate human beings who live in gratitude and trust and who strive to transform the world into God's just and peaceful kingdom?

Based on what you believe God is like there are two very different Christian messages: on the one hand, it's bad news of a coming last judgment for which you'd better be ready, a religion of threat, anxiety and self preservation, or, on the other hand, a very different kind of news: good news of an invitation to trust God with your

eternal destiny and to live life now in gratitude, love and compassion.

One way of being Christian is based on God saving some from an eternal hell. Another way — a more biblical way — is the transformation of ourselves into the people God wants us to be in the here and now, generous, compassionate, just, loving, serving, trusting God — with our lives, our futures, and our deaths.

Now the trouble with a sermon on God is that when we talk about God we are, all of us, inclined to try to say too much. Part of what God says to Job is "be quiet, shut up for awhile, stop talking and listen." The people who think most deeply and write most persuasively on the subject know that

when it comes to God our language is simply inadequate. There are no words big enough, Marcus Borg says. The philosopher Descartes said: "A finite mind cannot grasp God, who is infinite. But that does not prevent him from having a perception of God . . . . just as we can touch a mountain without being able to put one's arms around it." (William Placher, The Domestication of Transcendence, p. 84).

Part of the problem with religion is that it claims to know too much, to reduce the mystery of God to categories, ideas and notions we can understand — and in the process to create a God who thinks very much like we do.

Every now and then I watch Larry King and one time he was interviewing several leading televangelists including Tim LaHaye, author of the Left Behind series of books, Franklin Graham and T. D. Jakes, founder of a huge Dallas Megachurch with very impressive outreach ministries, who was modest, careful, respectful of the views of others, quieter than the others. Graham and LaHaye took my breath away with how much they had to say on every topic King brought up, how utterly certain they were of the mind and will of God on every issue, how unable to say those profoundly important three words — "I don't know" — "I'm not sure."

Belden Lane, professor of theological studies and American

studies at Saint Louis University, states that “we must speak (about God) but yet we cannot speak without stammering.” And best of all, the great Karl Barth who wrote more about God than almost anybody in history: 13 volumes of Dogmatic theology, 9,185 pages. Near the end of his life he said: “The angels laugh at old Karl. They laugh at him because he tries to grasp the truth about God in a book of Dogmatics. They laugh at the fact that volume follows volume and each is thicker than the previous one. As they laugh, the say to one another: ‘Look! Here he comes now with his little pushcart full of volumes of the Dogmatics! . . . . Truly, the angels laugh.”

It is the most profound question of all — God. All religion begins with the belief that there is a "More." Each religion, given the limits of language, names it: Yahweh, God, Allah, Brahman, Tao.

What makes us Christian is a distinct belief that God is beyond our ability to understand or describe, a mystery, but also that God, as Job learned, comes intimately close, to share our life, to be with us in all our days, on the good days and not so good days, in experiences of joy and sadness, victory and defeat, birth and death. What makes us Christian is our belief that God came close in Jesus Christ, lived in him, showed us what human life looks like, what our lives could look like;

in him, experienced human life, even death, in him and in him defeated the powers of death. Christians, with all people everywhere, ask the question of God, stammer and finally stand in silence before the mystery. Christians ask about God and look at Jesus.

Several recent books arguing against the existence of God and the efficacy of religion in general have become best sellers.

They are provocative and important books but they mostly neglect to mention the fact that the very best minds the human race has produced and evolved have wrestled with the question of God, from Plato to Nietzsche to

Einstein: Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas to Stephen Hawking.

Modern science, now facing the mystery of a universe expanding at the speed of light with nothingness, is now saying, “What we don’t know is infinitely larger than what we know: that there is, at the heart of things, a mystery.”

The late Kurt Vonnegut, who died a few weeks ago, said: “If I should ever die, God forbid; let this be my epitaph: The only proof he needed for the existence of God was music.”

That’s good enough for me. But we’re not sure we want to trust experience as an argument for God, we

Westerners aren't. In fact, many of us have been schooled to distrust experience, emotion. And yet, we do experience and feel: we do have experiences in which we know at a level beyond knowing the truth. Pascal said, "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing."

And Albert Einstein — "The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand in rapt awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and

sublimity reaches us only indirectly, this is religiousness. In this sense I am a devoutly religious man" (Time, "Einstein and Faith," April 6, 2007).

We do, I believe, as Job did one day, see God. So listen to your own experience: be open, at least, to the suggestion that God is close, that God comes to strengthen, heal, comfort, encourage. You don't have to tell: you don't have to testify. Sometimes I think it's better not even to try. But do listen: "Listen to your life" Frederick Buechner said — pay attention, particularly when you have a lump in your throat and tears in your eyes.

Whenever I read the verse in Job about God speaking out of the

whirlwind, I think automatically about a book by the late Langdon Gilkey, professor of theology at the University of Chicago, Naming the Whirlwind — it's a book of theology — and for me, a very important one. I got it down off the shelf to see if I could find some help with this sermon. It's a big 483 page, old book: the price on the tattered paper cover is $2.75. I paged through it and found a passage marked years ago and it brought back a vivid memory and experience on the day I first read the passage. We were living in Scotland that summer. I had taken Gilkey's book with me and was working my way through it. The marked passage evoked a memory: a foggy day in the Western Highlands: a light drizzle. We had driven up into the hills, parked the car

and went for a walk. It was isolated, absolutely silent except for the bleating of the sheep and new lambs. We walked single file up the steep, rocky path — all seven of us — and I thought I had never been in a more beautiful place, with the people I loved most in all the world. Life was so good. God was so good. There is so much "more." Before turning around to walk down, my youngest, 3 at the time, holding my hand. . . . we stopped and he and I built a cairn, a small rock tower the Scots built all over the Highlands to mark special spots. He liked building cairns and so did I so we built one.

When we arrived back at the small manse in Kinlochleven I returned to reading Gilkey — and this is what I read

and marked that day. Gilkey is talking about the experience of ultimacy — God in Secular Experience. He writes: "Common aspects of our experience: our deep joy in living, a sense of the pulsating vitality, and strength of life that every creature knows; the awe at the common wonder and beauty of life — perhaps in the creatures of nature or at the birth of a child; the precious sense of meaning and of hope when we find some purpose or activity that draws out our powers, and we know who we are in history and why we are here at this time and place; the wonder of community . . . . these common experiences are given to us and not created by us, but it is they that buoy us up, that make us glad we are alive, that fill us with deep joy." And then, Gilkey

added, “As gifts, they come to us from beyond ourselves, from the ultimate source of power and meaning.” That is to say, from God.

> **“Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind . . . .**
> **And Job answered: ‘I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.’ ”**
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> **Thanks be to God. Amen**